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# Taking Intervention Politics Seriously: Media Debates and the Contestation of African Regional Interventions ‘from Below’

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## ABSTRACT

Scholars increasingly investigate how the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) is contested and negotiated in practice. Yet little knowledge exists on the politics African regional interventions provoke in the societies affected by such interventions. Based on an analysis of media reports from Burkina Faso and The Gambia, we show that regional interventions are indeed contested locally, irrespective of the means of intervention applied. Our analysis demonstrates how local elites use regional norms and policies in order to claim power and define what is going (wr)on(g). With this, we provide evidence for the (contested) local effects of APSA and for the relevance of media for researching such effects.

## KEYWORDS

AU; ECOWAS; regional intervention; media; Burkina Faso; The Gambia

## Introduction

The evolution of regional norms and institutions in response to peace and security challenges in Africa, known as the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), has become an important subject of academic inquiry (Engel and Gomes Porto 2010, 2013; Aall and Crocker 2016). So far, the bulk of the works are interested in understanding the extent to which this set of norms and institutions is being implemented effectively and ‘is delivering’ on its promises (IPSS 2017, 2018). While initially the literature on APSA has mainly been concerned with formal norms and institutions, a growing body of work today also takes the politics involved in implementing APSA into account. Scholars stress, for instance, the important role of African bureaucrats in framing regional problems as intervention issues (Hardt 2016) and recognize that how and when regional norms are implemented is subject to interpretation by and negotiations among member states (Gelot 2012; Albrecht and Cold-Ravnkilde 2020; Hogan 2020). Moreover, scholars have also become cognizant of the simultaneous and overlapping emergence of different yet similarly mandated regional organizations at continental and sub-regional level and have therefore started to inquire into clashing interests and competing claims to leadership and authority among those charged with realizing APSA in practice (e.g. Franke 2007; Welz 2016; Vlavonou 2019; generally Brosig 2020). In all these accounts, implementing APSA is a political and contested endeavour in which actors with different and often

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competing interests struggle over defining the right path to implementation (see also Moe and Geis 2020).

Thus, although intervention politics is receiving increased analytical attention, existing works still share a top-down perspective on African regional governance according to which formal organizations, their interests and relationships are seen as the most relevant sites and issues for realizing APSA and are hence also placed centre stage in academic inquiry (see also Moe and Geis 2020). Largely overlooked in these debates so far is what this complex network of norms and institutions looks like ‘from below’, i.e. from the perspectives of societies in which the effects of APSA become manifest and shape politics and order on a daily basis (Sabrow 2017 is an exception). Despite the general recognition that interventions are by nature political undertakings – and therefore contested – this societal and perceptual dimension of African regional governance has hitherto received scant academic attention (Witt 2018; Witt and Khadiagala 2018, 138). This is all the more surprising as the wider (critical) literature on peace interventions has demonstrated their locally contested character and emphasized the agency of those allegedly ‘receiving’ interventions in shaping intervention outcomes (Pouligny 2006; Talentino 2007; Mac Ginty 2011; Richmond and Mitchell 2011; Müller and Bashar 2017; Daho, Duclos, and Jouhanneau 2019). How local actors perceive, relate to, and evaluate interventions has thus become an important research topic, yet not when it comes to African interveners. In fact, African regional organizations are still often – if only implicitly – portrayed as more ‘proximate’ to the locales and societies affected by conflicts, and are hence assumed to understand better what is at stake and offer more adaptive solutions than other potential interveners such as the UN, EU, or former colonial powers (Tavares 2010, 13; Sabrow 2017, 167). Seen from this perspective, local contestation of African interventions should be the exception.

With this article, we seek to make a first contribution to filling this lacuna by presenting findings from an analysis of media debates on regional interventions in response to political crises in Burkina Faso (2014/15) and The Gambia (2016/17).<sup>1</sup> In both cases, the regional intervention was led by the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), based on the organizations’ normative frameworks against unconstitutional changes of government (see generally Souaré 2014). So far, the majority of African regional interventions have taken place in response to such situations. Together, the two cases cover the full menu of African regional organizations’ means of intervention, ranging from allegedly non-coercive means such as mediation and negotiation (in both cases) to more coercive ones such as legal arbitration (in Burkina Faso) and the deployment of military force (in The Gambia). In the literature, both cases have so far been presented as success stories of APSA and the implementation of regional conflict prevention policies (Hartmann 2017; IPSS 2017, 30). Our analysis of local media debates tells a more ambiguous story.

Altogether, from a total of 1,064 media articles we reconstructed how in both cases the specific intervention as well as the responsible organizations were discussed and evaluated. For each case study we selected media articles from three different sources, covering the spectrum between pro-incumbent, intermediate, and pro-opposition voices. For Burkina Faso, these were the media outlets *Sidwaya*, *L’Observateur Paalga*, as well as *Le Pays*. For The Gambia, we used articles from *Foroyaa*, *The Standard*, as well *The Daily Observer*. Based on a keyword search, we selected all relevant articles – including opinion

articles, reprints of press releases and news items – for the time period from one year prior to the intervention until one year after it.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, we concentrate on presenting insights into concrete instances of local contestation of African regional interventions, that is, into the moments when the intervention became the subject of critique and public debate.<sup>3</sup> Especially in a context of high illiteracy rates and restrictions on the freedom of expression, media certainly cannot be taken uncritically as data source for studying ‘societal’ perceptions. Yet, as we demonstrate in this article, this should not invalidate such an undertaking from the outset. Despite the fact that they largely represent elite perspectives, we show that media can indeed provide analytical insights into understanding both the contestedness and effects of APSA ‘on the ground’.

With this article, we make at least two contributions. Firstly, our analysis sheds light on the local contestedness of African regional interventions and shows how, once activated, APSA becomes subject to public critique and contestation, regardless of whether the intervention relies on more or less coercive means. Secondly, we show how interventions create situations in which regional norms and policies are used by local political and societal elites to claim and contest power. Thus, while most research today focuses on power struggles and conflicts *among different organizations* involved in implementing APSA, our analysis in turn shows how regional organizations and their policies become subject to power struggles *among local elites* and fuel their respective efforts to define what is going (wr)on(g). Not least, this provides evidence for the local influence and relevance of African regional organizations. Indeed, their norms and intervention policies have, and are seen to have, tangible effects that are neither reflected in the intervening organizations’ own descriptions of intervention outcomes nor have they so far been recognized sufficiently in the literature on African regional organizations and their interventions. As we demonstrate in this article, these effects can only be rendered visible if intervention politics are taken seriously ‘all the way down’ to the level of societies and individuals in the concrete sites of intervention.

In the remainder of this article, both case studies are presented, starting with a short description of the regional intervention before elaborating for each case two different moments at which the regional intervention became subject to contestation. A conclusion finally summarizes our findings and spells out their value-added for scholarship on APSA and African regional interventions.

### Regional interventions seen ‘from below’

In both cases selected for our media analysis, AU and ECOWAS intervened in response to what was called an unconstitutional change of government, yet the contexts differed: in Burkina Faso the intervention took place in response to a ‘popular uprising’ against the incumbent president, while in The Gambia it was a reaction to the incumbent’s refusal to accept his electoral defeat. What differed in the two cases was thus the way in which the regional intervention was positioned vis-à-vis the popular will: In The Gambia, the regional intervention served to enforce the popular will as expressed in general elections. In Burkina Faso, by contrast, AU and ECOWAS’ legal doctrines in defence of constitutional order required the two organizations to somehow discipline the ‘popular uprising’ that had forced President Compaoré out of power so that constitutional order was restored

as soon as possible. Moreover, the interventions also relied on different means: mediation and negotiation – applied in both cases – were complemented by either legal arbitration (Burkina Faso) or the deployment of military force (The Gambia). Both cases are considered success stories for APSA and the implementation of regional conflict prevention policies (IPSS 2017, 30). Yet as we show in the following, locally, both interventions sparked public contestation, shaped by the specific intervention context of each case. Altogether, the start of the regional intervention in both cases triggered public attention to regional organizations and their policies, reflected in a sudden rise in the number of media reports. Moreover, across the newspaper outlets, reporting on regional organizations also became more evaluative, that is, explicitly positive/negative, once the interventions started. Thus, in the countries concerned, regional interventions do spark public debates. The remainder of this article will show in more detail how they do this and what kinds of debate result.

### *Burkina Faso: Contesting regional intervention in times of popular uprising*

On 31 October 2014, Burkina Faso's President Blaise Compaoré was forced to leave office after weeks of country-wide protests against his attempt to change the constitution and to embark on a fifth term in office. Backed by protesters, several high-ranking military – among them the deputy chief of the presidential regiment, General Zida – filled the void left by Compaoré and took over power (Frère and Englebert 2015, 298). Both ECOWAS and the AU intervened immediately and demanded a civilian-led government and the return to constitutional order. However, they decided neither to suspend Burkina Faso nor to impose sanctions to support a rapid transition to constitutional rule (AU PSC 2014; ECOWAS 2014). With joint support from ECOWAS, AU and the UN a Transitional Charter was drafted and adopted on 16 November 2014. Michel Kafando became the new President of the Transition and General Zida was appointed Prime Minister. Transitional elections that would mark the return to constitutional rule were scheduled for October 2015.

In Burkina Faso, AU and ECOWAS thus intervened in a popular uprising. In the following, we look more closely at two moments in the regional intervention that became particularly contentious. In both instances the regional intervention also relied on different means: in the first case, the mediation by AU and ECOWAS in 2014 was the subject of vast criticism which particularly addressed regional interveners' insufficient consideration of the specific context of the Burkinabe popular uprising. In the second case, a legal arbitration by the ECOWAS Court of Justice in 2015 sparked a public debate on whether regional norms, and which ones, should be applied in this situation. Apart from demonstrating the locally contested nature of the regional interventions, both moments also show how regional norms and intervention practices become subject to local elites' struggles for influence and access to power.

### *'Médecins après la morte' (Doctors after death)*

The beginning of the regional intervention in November 2014, which was criticized by a broad spectrum of political and societal actors, constitutes the first moment of contestation. Responding to the events in Burkina Faso, AU and ECOWAS decided neither to impose sanctions nor to suspend the country's membership. Instead, both organizations despatched mediators to work for a rapid restoration of constitutional order. Burkinabe

media reports at the time show that this was contested from various angles, targeting the coercive approach, rationality, and timing of the intervention.

One recurring depiction of the intervention prominent in the rather critical newspaper *L'Observateur Paalga* was that of an 'imposition' from above, in particular due to a 15-days timetable to carry out the return to civilian rule, set by AU and ECOWAS. One journalist framed the situation in the following words:

the sword of Damocles is hanging over the current strongman of Burkina, especially since the African Union (AU) has ordered the return of power to civilians within two weeks. Otherwise the battery of sanctions will surely fall upon our country (...) [authors' translation]. (*L'Observateur Paalga* 2014c)

The images of a Damoclean sword and the 'battery of sanctions' underline the perceived coercive pressure from regional interveners. It further hints at the clashing expectations with regard to the duration and outcomes of the transitional period. Regional mediators favoured a short transition period that would end with elections. Civil society organizations and key actors in the transition, in turn, sought a longer-term transition in order to build a credible democracy and carry out necessary social, political and economic reforms (Saidou 2018, 46–7). Both independent newspapers *L'Observateur Paalga* and *Le Pays* as well as the pro-government newspaper *Sidwaya* reported on General Zida's criticism of the pressure applied by regional interveners to return to civilian rule within the imposed time frame:

The African Union can talk for three days; it only affects the African Union. But for us it's important to reach a consensus on the basis of which we can be sure to be able to hold elections after one year without any problems and with results accepted peacefully and calmly by all [authors' translation]. (General Zida quoted in *L'Observateur Paalga* 2014b; *Le Pays* 2014d; *Sidwaya* 2014)

In the same vein, for the spokesman of the youth movement 'Balai citoyen', Guy Hervé Kam, the priority for Burkinabe civil society was to conduct a peaceful transition rather than to rush for national elections (*Le Pays* 2014c).

Part of the perspective of an 'imposition' from above is the criticism of the standardized rationality with which both organizations intervened, without considering that in the case of Burkina Faso it was not a classical military coup, but a civilian uprising that dissolved the national government (*L'Observateur Paalga* 2014a, 2014e). One journalist writing for the *Observateur Paalga* for instance described the mediators' standardized approach using the image of a doctor who 'rushed to the bedside of a convulsive Burkina to provide care before the patient's state of health deteriorated further' while forecasting that 'the three ECOWAS envoys will certainly decide to offer long-distance therapy' [authors' translation] (*L'Observateur Paalga* 2014d). This medical image of Burkina Faso as the 'sick patient' subject to 'long-distance therapy' stands in stark contrast to the success of the popular uprising that ended Compaoré's decades-long rule and the pride felt by the Burkinabe citizenry regarding this (Saidou 2018). Instead of being in need of a 'therapy', critics felt that AU and ECOWAS should support Burkinabe citizens' own ideas and strategies for a transition to constitutional rule, given that the two organizations had already neglected to support the people's struggle against Compaoré in the first place.

In this sense, a third argument prevalent in the media criticized AU and ECOWAS for their delayed reactions to the situation in Burkina. Both AU and ECOWAS were accused

of being ‘doctors after death’, coming in only after mass mobilizations had forced Compaoré to leave office:

Paying the price of great sacrifices it was indeed necessary that the popular uprising triumphed in order for these two organizations to intervene. Instead of prevention, they played the role of doctors after death [authors’ translation]. (Le Pays 2014b)

Particularly voices from Burkinabe civil society criticized the non-reaction of both organizations to Compaoré’s attempt to change the constitution, which was what necessitated the popular uprising in the first place:

Now that the Burkinabe people are winning their struggle, ECOWAS wants to intervene to oppose a coup d’état, whereas Blaise Compaoré had carried out a constitutional coup d’état [authors’ translation]. (youth movement ‘Balai citoyen’ quoted in Le Pays 2014c)

The criticism of being ‘doctors after death’ thus also addressed the normative foundation of APSA: it entailed a demand for stronger action against unconstitutional actions by incumbents to prolong their period in power and for expanded regional measures to prevent such situations, for instance by specifying limits on terms in office (Le Pays 2014a, 2014e; see generally Wiebusch and Murray 2019).

In sum, media reports reflect that for all those defending the popular uprising, AU and ECOWAS’ mediation efforts were too coercive, formulaic, and came too late. But rather than merely rejecting regional intervention, critics actually demanded better and in parts even *more* regional intervention. In this sense, their contestation of regional intervention also became a means for making sense of what was going on and for supporting and justifying their own political demands in Burkina’s post-Compaoré transition.

### *How much authority shall be given to regional law?*

The second instance of contestation is related to a regional *legal* intervention, in this case an adjudication of the ECOWAS Court of Justice on the country’s electoral code. It shows that legal forms of intervention, too, experience contestation ‘from below’.

In April 2015 the National Transitional Council adopted a revision of the electoral code in preparation for the October 2015 elections. It stipulated that all former government members who had supported the amendment to the constitution should be excluded from participating in transitional elections. Soon after, deputies of the previous regime requested the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice to decide on this matter. They argued that the new electoral code violated their human right to participate in free and fair elections. On 13 July 2015 the ECOWAS Court of Justice claimed that the bill violated regional and international law and called for removal of all obstacles to participation in transitional elections. For the Court there was no justifiable reason to exclude such a large number of citizens (ECOWAS Court 2015, 11).

In Burkinabe media the decision became a political issue and divided public debate between supporters and opponents of the transitional government. The frequency and detailed manner in which newspaper articles referred to central legal doctrines and policies of APSA is noteworthy, notably to the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, as well as to the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. Numerous and lengthy quotations from these documents were used to support positions,



thus indicating the high relevance ascribed to African regional organizations' norms and policies notwithstanding the simultaneous contestation of the organizations' actions.

For the claimants, the former government elite, the Court's decision was regarded as a victory (L'Observateur Paalga 2015a; Sidwaya 2015):

It is a satisfaction not only for the CDP [Compaoré's party Congress for Democracy and Progress] but for all the people in Burkina Faso. This is because the decision of the ECOWAS Court of Justice will allow access to inclusive, free, peaceful, and transparent elections [authors' translation]. (Eddie Komboigo, CDP, quoted in Sidwaya 2015)

Contrary to this, supporters of the transitional government contested the Court's verdict which

sounds like an encouragement to irresponsibility and impunity in politics. In the case of Burkina Faso the bonus for irresponsibility and impunity in politics is even more appalling, since Blaise Compaoré's insistence on holding on to power caused the death of about thirty Burkinabe whose only crime was to have stood up, bare handed, to block the seizure of power. ECOWAS witnessed this tragedy live [authors' translation]. (Le Pays 2015b)

The ECOWAS Court's decision was followed by weeks of debate on how to interpret it. Opponents particularly referred to its contradiction of the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. The latter stipulates that changing electoral law is only possible until six months ahead of elections. *L'Observateur Paalga* reflected upon this confusion over the applicability of regional law:

Now that the decision of the community's court has been handed down and (...) is not open to appeal and binding for states, what do we do? This is worth asking, given that the electoral code that has just been called into question cannot be immediately reviewed without risking again falling under the jurisdiction of the same ECOWAS which prohibits any revision of electoral laws if elections are less than six months away. A real squaring of the circle that, if it is not resolved, must be resolved in the greater interest of the nation [authors' translation]. (L'Observateur Paalga 2015b)

Similarly, the Civil Council for the Monitoring of the Transition and the 11<sup>th</sup> October Revolution, a civil society grouping established during the transition, noted:

the ambiguous nature of this decision. (...) the ECOWAS Court has not declared the new electoral code unconstitutional or inconsistent with the [Transitional] Charter. (...) The ECOWAS Court, refusing to rule on this matter, although requested to by the plaintiffs, at the same time affirms that it lacks the authority to comment on the electoral code of an ECOWAS member country [authors' translation]. (Le Pays 2015c)

Thus, the debate about the ECOWAS Court's decision was nurtured by the ambiguity of and contradictions among different regional norms and the question of their correct application. Strikingly and unlike previous years, this debate was indeed public, as it drew on active contributions from quite a large number of both political and societal actors. In contrast to this, ECOWAS and AU remained silent on the Court's decision.

As a response to the deadlock, various opposition parties announced they were submitting a counter claim (L'Observateur Paalga 2015c). In this situation *Le Pays* occasionally suggested approaching the AU as a judge on this matter, for the AU's Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance was seen as a higher authority whose provisions were regarded as superior to those of ECOWAS law (Le Pays 2015b). This suggestion,



however, was contested by former members of the government, arguing that it was not possible to tackle sub-regional issues using continental law (Le Pays 2015a).

Altogether, elites from both sides of the political spectrum argued about the applicability and authority of regional law during this crucial phase of Burkina Faso's transition. While some welcomed regional law because of their own interests, others rejected it on similar grounds as well. The debate sparked by the ECOWAS Court's decision thus highlights how regional organizations and their norms, rather than being perceived passively by local audiences, become subject to local elites' struggle to make sense of what is going (wr)on(g) and to exert their own role in times of transition (see also Witt 2019).

### Summary

The case of Burkina Faso shows that both mediation and legal arbitration can become contentious. In the first situation – contestation of the AU and ECOWAS mediation efforts in 2014 – both 'too much' and 'too little' intervention was criticized. 'Too much' intervention was criticized in relation to the coercive and standardized manner of intervention which neglected local achievements and expectations of a peaceful transition. 'Too little' intervention was seen in the delayed reaction of regional interveners which had remained silent on Compaoré's attempt to change the constitution. These two strands of criticism demonstrate that although intervention practices were contested, regional organizations' interventions were not *per se* refused, but accepted – would even have been welcomed – if they had considered (more) the particular local context. This also holds true for the second situation, in which at least one faction of the Burkinabe political elite welcomed the ECOWAS Court decision because it supported their cause. Both the debate about the Court's verdict and that on the 2014 mediation thus show how in times of intervention regional norms and policies are perceived as having an effect on the local political arena and thus become subject to elites' struggles over power and influence.

Compared to the case of Burkina Faso, the regional intervention in The Gambia not only took place in a different context, but also drew on different means, notably the threat and deployment of military force.

### *The Gambia: Contesting regional intervention in times of post-electoral crisis*

In The Gambia, presidential elections were held in December 2016. They were unexpectedly won by opposition candidate Adama Barrow. President Yahya Jammeh, who had ruled the country since 1996, initially accepted his defeat, but shortly afterwards refused to give up power, citing serious irregularities in the electoral process (Hultin et al. 2017). In line with their provisions against unconstitutional changes of government, ECOWAS and AU rejected Jammeh's attempt to stay in power and promised to use 'all necessary means' to ensure that the electoral result was enforced. Several mediation missions to Jammeh, led by a troika of sitting and former regional presidents, remained unsuccessful (Hartmann 2017). When Barrow was sworn in in neighbouring Senegal and an ECOWAS military mission assembled at the border to The Gambia, Jammeh finally left the country and fled to Equatorial Guinea. The presence of the regional security architecture in The Gambia nevertheless outlasted the actual crisis situation as AU and ECOWAS, among others, decided to continue accompanying The Gambia's transitional process. ECOWAS renewed the mandate of the ECOWAS Mission in The Gambia (ECOMIG) with a

focus on reforming the Gambian army and security sector while the AU set up a post-conflict reconstruction programme (AU PSC 2017).

In the literature, the regional intervention in response to The Gambia's post-electoral crisis is framed as 'restoration of democracy' and successful implementation of regional norms (Hartmann 2017; IPSS 2017, 30; Williams 2017). However, as we will explain below, media reporting reveals that the intervention also sparked local contestation and became subject to critical public debate.

In the following, we will look closely at two concrete instances in which the presence of regional norms and institutions in The Gambia became contested locally, and hence subject to public debate, and explain how a variety of political and social actors used the regional presence in their struggle to shape The Gambia's post-Jammeh transition. Both instances underline the perceived (or actual) relevance and clout of the African peace and security architecture and the policies and intervention practices emanating from it, as seen from the perspective of those affected by them.

### *Last resort vs. partisan intervention*

The first issue of contestation deals with a very fundamental question: whether ECOWAS and AU used rightful means in their efforts to resolve the post-electoral crisis and acted in line with their own norms and principles.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, both more critical newspaper outlets quote and report on numerous actors – civil society and opposition politicians in particular – who, once Jammeh refused to step down, explicitly demanded a regional intervention by ECOWAS and the AU. Most of these calls stressed that in line with ECOWAS' own statements, the preferred way of resolving the Gambian crisis was by means of mediation and negotiation. A commentator in *Foroyaa* for instance writes:

Dialogue is the only way out to avoid conflict. We hope presidents Buhari [of Nigeria] and Mahama [of Ghana] will begin their shuttle diplomacy immediately to clarify the ECOWAS position of trying to solve the problem in The Gambia through mediation rather than force. (Foroyaa 2016)

Likewise, the speaker of the opposition party was reported as having declared,

it is clear that the ECOWAS stands for mediation. He said 'force only comes when Gambians are at each other's throat and when power is taken or maintained unconstitutionally.' He said hence, the Office of the President-Elect is calling on ECOWAS to speed up the coming of President Buhari to explore peaceful ways of solving the impasse. (Foroyaa 2017b)

Unsurprisingly politicians from the opposition party and critical civil society both welcomed the regional intervention. Yet, as in the quotes above, they also regularly stressed that it was a mediation mission based on non-coercive means. Force, again, would only serve as a last resort.

For the pro-Jammeh faction, in turn, the situation obviously looked quite different, most extensively covered in the pro-government newspaper *The Standard*. They argued that by setting up its mediation mission ECOWAS had already taken sides, because the question of who won the presidential elections should have been settled by the Gambian Supreme Court and not by regional mediators. Yet the Court was unable to hold a meeting because it had no judges except the chief justice. Rather than mediation, the pro-

Jammeh faction thus demanded that ECOWAS send judges from other ECOWAS countries who could serve in The Gambia's Supreme Court and hear Jammeh's petition 'in order to settle this impasse peacefully and judiciously' (The Standard 2017a). The interim spokesperson of Jammeh's party therefore retrospectively explained:

We all know there was an election and Jammeh accepted defeat and later refused to accept and went to court. (...) When that happened, the judges were going to come from Nigeria and Sierra Leone. They should have come and decide on the case. If they decided that the elections were free and fair Jammeh would have given up because their decisions would have been respected. But rather than bringing those four judges, Ecowas [*sic*] and other international bodies recruited a massive military [force] to come and invade The Gambia. (The Standard 2017f)

Because the requested judicial solution was not pursued, ECOWAS was accused of partisanship and of intending to 'invade' The Gambia. Jammeh therefore stated publicly that ECOWAS had, in fact, acted in violation of its own principles:

What is clearly incontrovertible is that the decision of ECOWAS on the current situation to implement the results of the December 1st 2016, elections by whatever means possible, is totally illegal, as it violates the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states, which is an entrenched clause in the ECOWAS treaty. It is in effect a declaration of war and an insult to our constitution. It is therefore absolutely unacceptable. (The Standard 2017g)

Other members of Jammeh's party regularly warned ECOWAS publicly 'to refrain from any action that would disrespect or destabilize the sovereignty, independence, peace, tranquillity and territorial integrity of The Gambia and her people' (The Standard 2017a). Because ECOWAS had not followed Jammeh's request for a national judicial solution to the crisis, Jammeh later argued that ECOWAS was consequently unable to serve as a neutral mediator:

This blatant impartial [*sic*] and one-dimensional approach clearly indicates that the role of ECOWAS is not predicated on the pursuit of justice in the resolution of this stalemate. This partisanship of ECOWAS has also disqualified it to provide mediation services, as the genuine mediator has to be neutral and impartial to win the trust and confidence of the parties to the conflict. (The Standard 2017g)

The same accusation of ECOWAS' partisanship re-emerged later on once a Gambian court decided to freeze Jammeh's assets. During the regional mediation, a so-called 'gentlemen's agreement' had been signed by Jammeh and representatives from the UN, AU, and ECOWAS in which it was declared that,

ECOWAS, the AU and the UN commit to work with the Government of The Gambia to prevent the seizure of assets and properties lawfully belonging to former President Jammeh or his family and those of his Cabinet members, government officials and Party supporters, as guaranteed under the Constitution and other Laws of The Gambia. (The Standard 2017i)

When the Court nevertheless decided to freeze Jammeh's assets, the pro-Jammeh faction felt betrayed – particularly by those whose signature was meant to guarantee the implementation of the 'gentlemen's agreement' (Foroyaa 2017a; The Standard 2017h). Once more, from the perspective of the pro-Jammeh faction, ECOWAS and the other internationals had taken sides, this time by *not* intervening in defence of their own mediation result.

### *What are ECOMIG soldiers really doing here?*

While the contestation of regional involvement in Gambian politics by the pro-Jammeh camp cited above is not surprising, there was also a more subtle debate and public concern about the (likely) presence of ECOWAS military personnel on Gambian soil. Although less confrontational, this nevertheless highlights local concerns about regional interventions that have hitherto been neglected in academic accounts of the 2016/17 intervention. Quite remarkably, these concerns are a recurring theme across all three media outlets.

In early 2017, rumours had been spreading that ECOWAS could intervene militarily in The Gambia. Several news articles consequently reported that people were fleeing their homes in fear of an imminent regional military intervention (Foroyaa 2017f, 2017h). This was also supported by public statements such as that of a former Gambian Ambassador to the US who warned in *The Standard* that ‘a military intervention in Gambia could destabilize the country (...)’ and that ‘in that case, it’s going to be bad for Gambia’ (The Standard 2016). One very concrete fear was that of a likely confrontation between Gambian armed forces and ECOWAS troops. A *Foroyaa* journalist therefore demanded for instance that ‘the troops should fraternize and see themselves as soldiers protecting the lives and properties of their people. They should be the bastion of sub-regional integration and the security of democratic countries’ (Foroyaa 2017i). Thus, even before a single soldier had set foot on Gambian soil, the media already reflected a general fear about the likely ECOWAS military intervention and its consequences for the country, quite irrespective of political affiliation.

Once the ECOMIG troops actually entered the country, this fear was reflected in numerous press statements by ECOWAS representatives, Gambian politicians and high-ranking military personnel who explicitly justified and explained the work and official mandate of the ECOWAS troops. The Interior Minister was quoted as saying that “‘a security situation existed which necessitated the interventions [*sic*] of ECOWAS, which led to the presences [*sic*] of ECOWAS troops in the Gambia’” (...) and ‘explained that ECOMIG forces are their guest: “ECOMIG is here to support Gambia’s security stabilisation, to consolidate democratic gains in accordance with clear international rules of engagement’” (The Daily Observer 2017b). Also, the speaker of the opposition party was quoted as clarifying that ‘the coming of the forces is not an invasion but for security’ (The Standard 2016) while the Chief of the Defence Staff, upon arriving, made clear that ‘ECOWAS forces were not an occupation force’ (Foroyaa 2017e). Similarly, the Commander of ECOMIG was regularly quoted explaining that ‘this mission is the coalition of the ECOWAS member’s states [*sic*] or Coalition of the Willing’ (Foroyaa 2017c) and ‘clarified that his mission is not a military invasion, intervention, peacekeeping or occupation force, but rather a peace mission’ (The Standard 2017d). By stressing what the ECOWAS mission was *not*, these public statements seem to speak against a general suspicion about the role and likely negative consequences of ECOWAS’ military presence in The Gambia, thus seeking to convince sceptics of the intervention’s overall benevolent character.

Those explaining the function and mandate of ECOMIG usually did so with reference to regional policy frameworks and norms that justify ECOWAS’ military presence in The Gambia and thereby underlined that ECOMIG was not a mission for the newly inaugurated president, but for the good of the entire country (Foroyaa 2017d, 2018; The Standard

2017b, 2017e). In this sense, those explaining ECOMIG to the wider public also made sure to stress that it was mandated to ensure ‘that peace and security is maintained (...) for the population’ (The Standard 2017d) and that ‘the troops were also keen to, in case of use of force, limit the destruction to vital installations of the country’ and to ‘ensure minimum losses’ (The Standard 2018). Public defenders of ECOMIG also often stressed that the military forces were not there to stay, but had a clear mandate over a limited period of time (The Standard 2017d).

The fears about ECOMIG’s presence in The Gambia crystallised in several concrete cases of (alleged) misconduct that were also exploited in the media. The first, less salient case was allegations about ECOMIG soldiers’ involvement in the illegal timber trade, about which even the newly inaugurated President Barrow had to publicly comment (Foroyaa 2018). More important was the case of clashes between ECOMIG soldiers and protesters in Kanilai, former President Jammeh’s home town. In June 2017, ECOMIG soldiers shot at villagers from Kanilai who had gathered for a demonstration against ECOMIG and ‘the manner [in which] the soldiers were treating them’ (Foroyaa 2017g; The Daily Observer 2017a), and were demanding ‘the departure of ECOWAS military forces’ (The Standard 2017c). One person died while at least six were injured. Crucially, in none of the media reports were the protesters quoted directly, so that the actual issue at hand and concrete accusations against ECOMIG by the villagers remain vague. The former ruling party, however, used this incident to criticize “‘the militarization of Kanilai” and other areas of Foni [the district]’ and argued that ‘the presence of the ECOMIG forces and soldiers [had] discomfited and intimidated the residents’ (The Standard 2017h). The vagueness with which even this concrete event is narrated in Gambian newspaper reports does not mean that it is unimportant. On the contrary, the numerous yet fuzzy reports about the clashes in Kanilai quite effectively nourished the general suspicion of the regional forces as explained above, and may hence be even more powerful than any more concrete accounts. Moreover, the incident not only underlines that there were, indeed, protests against ECOMIG, but also illustrates a perceptual divergence between ECOWAS on the one hand and the residents (at least) of Kanilai on the other: as *The Standard* observed, when ECOWAS extended the mandate of ECOMIG a few days after the killing, they ‘made no mention of tension between the foreign troops and Gambian protesters who have called them [an] “occupying force”’ (The Standard 2017e).

### Summary

Though quite different in character and relevance, these two instances of local contestation and suspicion against the involvement of regional actors in The Gambia’s post-electoral crisis contradict the widely-held image of a regional intervention that was generally welcomed. In fact, they show that not only the deployment of military force, but also mediation can become contentious and spark critical public debates in the country involved. Both situations thus reveal local perceptions of the relevance and power of the African peace and security architecture and the intervention practices emanating from it. They came to be the focus of such critical public debates exactly because they were seen as having an effect. Moreover, both situations also show that these policies and intervention practices became or are suspected of having been the subject of local elites’ struggles over power and influence in Gambian politics and the new order that was to arise as result of the regional intervention: on the one hand, because both sides

to the conflict used regional norms and institutions to demand the intervention they favoured for resolving the electoral impasse; on the other hand, scepticism concerning ECOWAS' 'real' role in The Gambia was based on the suspicion that they could be there to serve 'somebody's' interests.

## Conclusion

Although scholars are devoting more and more attention to the complex and contested setting in which APSA is implemented, i.e. the politics involved, the question of how APSA is experienced and perceived 'from below' within the societies directly affected by interventions remains an empirical blind spot. This article is a first attempt at filling this lacuna. Our analysis of contestations and public criticism of regional interventions provides evidence for a whole dimension of intervention politics, i.e. local contestation and the societal repercussions of APSA, that have hitherto received scant attention in the literature on Africa's regional security governance architecture.

In Burkina Faso, the regional intervention in the 2014 political crisis was criticized both for its detachment from the local context and for its ignorance of preceding infringements of regional norms by then incumbent President Compaoré. Later, the ECOWAS Court's decision on the eligibility criteria for running in transitional elections became a public bone of contention as militants from both sides tried to interpret the verdict in their respective interests. In The Gambia, the pro-Jammeh camp vigorously contested the legal basis as well as impartiality of ECOWAS' intervention in response to the 2016 electoral impasse, while media reports also reveal widespread suspicion and fear of the regional ECOMIG military force – what its intentions were, and what consequences the deployment of ECOMIG would have for the country.

Though quite different in kind and consequences, these examples firstly show how African regional interventions spark public debate and criticism from various angles, and thus demonstrate that they are indeed contested locally. Quite remarkably, all kinds of regional means of intervention – mediation/negotiation, legal arbitration, and military force – were subject to public contestation, regardless of whether the intervention relied on more or less coercive means. Moreover, what was contested was both too much and too little regional intervention. Most often, however, contestations flared up in connection with different interpretations of the correct form, aim, and normative basis of intervention, rather than questioning the legitimacy of African regional organizations' interventions *per se*. In this sense, contestation even reaffirmed AU and ECOWAS and their norms and policies to intervene in their member states.

Secondly, the media debates also reveal how regional norms and policies become subject to local power struggles and various actors' attempts to define and contest what is going (w)ron(g). For instance, those contesting AU and ECOWAS' detached and formalistic approach to resolving the political crisis in Burkina Faso also did so because the regional mediation did not promote the more comprehensive transition those who had ousted Compaoré from office initially had in mind. Once the ECOWAS Court had handed down its verdict, both sides to the conflict used regional norms to interpret the verdict in their respective interest. In a similar vein, for The Gambia's former President Jammeh, accusing regional interveners of partisanship and ignorance of their own norms became a matter of political survival. Others, in turn, feared such an

instrumentalisation of regional norms and institutions: for instance, when Gambians suspected soldiers from the regional military force ECOMIG of serving the interests of the newly elected president (or their own?) but not the country. Together, these examples of public contestation demonstrate the locally perceived power and relevance of regional norms and institutions that are implemented in an intervention. This, too, is an effect of African regional interventions that has hitherto rarely been accounted for. If regional norms and institutions had been seen as impotent und irrelevant, they would not have been debated publicly or used for political purposes (see also Witt 2019).

In sum, this article demonstrated that an analysis of media reports on regional organizations and their intervention policies can add novel perspectives to the study of African regional security governance. While the literature is predominantly concerned with delineating the organizational complexity and politics involved in implementing APSA, our analysis of media reports reveals a dimension of complexity and politics hitherto largely ignored in this debate. This brings out how the implementation of African regional organizations' norms and policies becomes subject to local power struggles and various actors' claims to and contestation of power 'on the ground.' Apart from providing new empirical evidence, these local and societal dynamics also help reconstruct alternative experiences, priorities, and expectations of African regional organizations and APSA, which – at the very least – can serve academic debates as a corrective foil. Moreover, they also offer important insights into understanding whose interests the implementation of APSA ultimately serves, not only with regard to the definition of roles and hierarchies for the organizations charged with implementing APSA, but also locally in the sites and societies in which APSA has an immediate effect.

## Notes

1. The media analysis is part of a larger research project, now financed by the German Research Foundation (DFG), in which we investigate local perceptions of regional interventions by means of different methods and levels of abstraction, also involving ethnographic focus group research in both countries.
2. This is divided across the different media outlets as follows: *Sidwaya* (208), *L'Observateur Paalga* (158), *Le Pays* (235), *Foroyaa* (195), *The Standard* (193), *The Daily Observer* (75). All articles were retrieved from the database [www.allafrica.com](http://www.allafrica.com).
3. The term 'local' is deliberately used here in a broad, non-prescriptive way to describe politics, actors, and processes relevant at or below the national 'level,' seeking to neither romanticise and objectify 'the local' as a somehow given social space nor to imply any given distinction from what is considered as 'international' or 'regional' (see generally Hirblinger and Simons 2015; Mac Ginty 2015).
4. This has also become a subject of academic legal debate (Kreß and Nußberger 2017; Williams 2017).

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